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Link: <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0704/03/acd.01.html>)

ROBERTS (voice-over): What's killing our pets? Tracing the poison in the pet food all the way to China. But who knew what and when? And that's not all. Some of the poison could be in the human food supply. Tonight, on 360.

And turning spring break from this to this. Inside a growing movement, college kids on the beach not doing what comes naturally. When 360 continues.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ROBERTS: "Please investigate Menu Foods and their flagrant negligence to issue the pet food recall sooner. This would have probably saved many lives. My sweet dog passed away a week ago from eating this tainted food." Cheryl Wilson in Louisville, Kentucky.

A grieving pet owner seeking the truth. Just one of hundreds of e-mails that we've received about the growing scandal surrounding poisoned pet food. Well, just who is responsible?

CNN's Joe Johns has been doing some digging and is "Keeping Them Honest".

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

JOE JOHNS, CNN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): In terms of sheer scale, the nationwide impact of the contaminated pet food problem is enormous: 10,000 complaints yet to be verified. The recall of 60 million cans and pouches of pet food.

But to get a real feel for how this thing is affecting people, you have to take it down to the individual household. Alexander Nunez had a French terrier named Bam-Bam.

ALEXANDER NUNEZ, DOG DIED FROM EATING TAINTED FOOD: I feel like my dog was taken from me and he was murdered.

JOHNS: The dog had just gotten a clean bill of health from the vet when he started eating wet pet food from a batch that had been recalled.

NUNEZ: The kidney failure was so bad the doctor recommended that I put him to sleep.

JOHNS: How nearly 100 brands of pet food got contaminated is a scientific detective story, and there's a lot we still don't know.

(on camera) Among the obvious questions, as always, who knew what and when? Six

weeks ago, on February 20, Menu Foods, the company at the white hot center of all of this because it supplies almost 100 pet food brands, got the first warning: complaints from owners whose pets were getting sick or refusing to eat.

The company started testing animals a week later, and some of them died.

(voice-over) But the Food and Drug Administration apparently wasn't told about the problem until much later and still has not been able to confirm how widespread it may be. In Congress, some are already calling for hearings.

SEN. DICK DURBIN (D-IL), MAJORITY WHIP: I think when you have a company that discovers a problem that's killing animals and they don't report it for three weeks to the Food and Drug Administration, it is, at best, gross negligence.

JOHNS: Menu has said it delayed the recall to try to confirm whether the food was the source of the problem and not something else.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We were testing the wheat gluten. We were testing the finished product to try and find something wrong.

JOHNS: It turns out the source of the contamination is not rat poison, as was originally suspected, but apparently wheat gluten, which is used basically to make gravy. It contained a chemical called melamine. Melamine is used in plastics and pesticides.

A veterinarian and toxicologist who works for the ASPCA, which by the way, was the first to discover the toxic chemical was not rat poison, says melamine may be even more of a danger to cats than to dogs like Bam-Bam. Cats seem more sensitive.

STEVE HANSEN, ASPCA ANIMAL POISON CONTROL CENTER: The feeding trial was done in which several cats died. That's very important information. We know it's something in the diet that's causing death in cats and the kidney failure is the result.

JOHNS: So how and where did melamine get mixed into the wheat gluten and then get mixed into the pet food? Right now that's the mystery.

What we know is that the wheat gluten went from manufacturer in China to a plant in Kansas City owned by a company called Kimnutra (ph) that has recalled products containing wheat gluten from the Chinese supplier.

Kimnutra (ph) earlier had sent some of the suspect products to two Menu Foods plants, one in Emporia, Kansas, the other in Pennsauken, New Jersey.

If you're wondering whether it could have gotten into the human food supply, too, FDA says there's no indication of that, but the investigation is ongoing. Kimnutra (ph) says it did not ship to facilities that manufacture food for human consumption.

Legal experts say, though pet owners may be able to recover some of their vet costs, there is little that can be done for their grief and emotional distress.

ANDREW POPPER, LAW PROFESSOR: It's direct out of pocket costs. It's veterinary, animal hospital related expenses plus the loss of direct value of the animal itself.

JOHNS: For now, though, it's the scientific investigation that matters most to keep this from happening again. Though that's little comfort to the families that have lost their beloved pets. Joe Johns, CNN, Washington.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

ROBERTS: Christie Keith that been investigating this story from the very beginning. She is a contributing editor for PetConnection.com. And she joins us now from San Francisco.

Christie, the FDA has said that 15 pets died from the tainted food. The veterinarian information puts the number at somewhere just over a hundred. But how many do you think have actually been attributed to this or could be attributed, at least, to this poisoned food?

CHRISTIE KEITH, PETCONNECTION.COM: Well, I think that the real issue is that we truly don't know, which underscores what I see as the biggest problem here, which is that there is no system to track animal deaths, even when there might be a link to human health issues, that there's no system to report them. It's a matter of investigating and trying to put pieces together.

It would be extremely unlikely, based on the data that we do have coming out of places like Veterinarian Information Network, public health veterinarians, that it is -- that the numbers are anywhere near 15. Those are mostly just the animals who died in Menu's test.

ROBERTS: How high do you think it could go? What's been reported on your web site?

KEITH: We've had a total number of reported affected animals just over 9,000.

ROBERTS: Wow.

KEITH: Now, these are self-reported cases. These are not by any stretch of the imagination confirmed. They are pet owners reporting on their own volition. However, we do ask them to provide veterinary contact information and confirm that they were feeding their pets food on the recall list.

Our exact numbers on the dogs as of today at 7 p.m. was 1,434 dogs dead, 1,751 cats.

ROBERTS: Wow.

KEITH: And a total reporting of 9,092.

ROBERTS: Do you think that the FDA or Menu Foods had of acted sooner, that there would have been fewer pet deaths?

KEITH: Without question. We've heard stories on PetConnection.com from our readers, heart-breaking stories of people who -- whose pets went do kidney failure, who put them in the hospital, who spent sometimes thousands of dollars getting them well, bringing them home and feeding them the same foods that had made them ill. Because they had no idea that that was what was a threat to them. And those pets then died.

Certainly, any pet who died subsequent to the initiation of the feeding trials, the first reported deaths, could have been avoided if there had been some better notification or system in place to alert veterinarians and bring them into the process so that they could advise their clients and monitor their patients appropriately.

ROBERTS: Well, Christie, you've been really following this closely. Keep up the good work. Thanks for being with us tonight.

KEITH: Thank you.